



THE POINT
COMMUNITY CHURCH

Elder Position Document: Church Discipline

Current TPCC Elders:

- Tony Cecil
- Andy Lawrence
- John Martin
- Frank Phillips

*To email the elders with any questions or comments, please do so at elders@thepointcommunity.net

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The Need for Church Discipline

Church discipline is one of the most misunderstood and misapplied practices of the church today, and yet it remains one of the most desperately needed. Church discipline confronts our unbelief and calls us back to faith in the gospel. Rightly understood and applied, it functions in the body as the spiritual immune system for the church, helping it fight off the spiritual sickness and disease of unbelief. Without it, the local body of Christ will eventually succumb to the viruses of sin, be weakened in its spiritual vitality and eventually die a slow and agonizing death. This death will take the form of either division and destruction or spiritual compromise and loss of effective gospel witness. Both are devastating to the mission of the church. Both can be avoided if the means of grace of loving discipline are applied early and often.

A Definition of Church Discipline

In its broadest sense, church discipline can be anything the body of Christ does to train and/or call Christians to abandon sin and unbelief and instead to live faithful and holy lives. **Formative** church discipline involves preaching, teaching, prayer, Bible study, community, and any other activities that spur believers on to love and serve God wholeheartedly. Formative church discipline is preventative in nature in that it involves teaching truth in such a way that it promotes the joyful pursuit of godliness and Christ-likeness instead of sin.

In a more specific sense, however, *church discipline is the responsibility of the body of Christ to confront and correct a sinning believer in order to bring him/her back in line with God's Word.* **Restorative** church discipline involves correction, exhortation and rebuke. This form of church discipline moves beyond preventative measures and instead involves actions taken to restore a Christian who is living in sin back to belief in the gospel. Restorative discipline only comes into play after a believer has progressed into a habitual pattern of sinful attitudes and actions. It is the process of intentionally confronting a believer who is acting in **persistent unbelief and sin**, calling them to confession of it and helping them turn back to God in living a life consistent with the gospel.

Today whenever believers discuss or mention “church discipline,” they are typically referring to **restorative** church discipline and not **formative**. Because of the resulting unfamiliarity with restorative church discipline, however, there is much misunderstanding and confusion as to what biblical, corrective discipline actually looks like. *This position paper is an attempt to bring biblical instruction and clarity to the subject of restorative church discipline, as well as serve as a practical guide for members of The Point Community Church (TPCC).* In the remainder of this position paper, therefore, the words “church discipline” will actually be a reference to **restorative (corrective)** church discipline.

Church Discipline in Light of the Gospel¹

We are created in the image of God, and we are created to reflect God through our lives. However, because of sin's entry into God's created order, all of God's creation is marred by sin—things are not what they are supposed to be. By nature we are all sinful, resulting in continual rebellion against God. But because of God's rich mercy and great love, He redeems His people through the finished work of Christ on the cross and brings us, as sinful human beings, back into a right relationship with Himself. The sad reality for us as Christians is that (1) we still struggle to believe in who God is, even though He has revealed Himself to us in Scripture; (2) we still struggle to believe in what God has done for us in and through the gospel; and (3) we still struggle to believe that God's promises and power apply to us.

This struggle to live out the gospel takes place within the context of our everyday lives and relationships. Despite the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, we are all still weary and wayward sinners who need help every step of the way to better understand, believe, and walk in a way pleasing to the Lord—a way that brings glory to Him by building up His body in love (Eph. 4:16) and advancing His kingdom in a dark and dying world (cf. Matt. 28:18-20). Every member of Christ's body needs one another to remember that this life is a journey toward heaven that requires continual repentance, grace and endurance.

This is why our “church experience” must be more than attending programs and classes. We must live in *meaningful community* together, learning to bring the gospel to bear on the personal sinfulness we so often tolerate. This is not a nit-picky holiness club but rather a loving family that cares for each other enough not to allow sin and unbelief go unchecked. Church discipline, then, is the loving process we use to confront sin and unbelief and call one another back to faith in the gospel.

¹ Sojourn Community Church, *Church Discipline Guidelines*, p. 10.

The Purpose of Church Discipline²

The purpose of church discipline is the spiritual restoration of fallen members, the consequent strengthening of the church and glorifying of the Lord. When a sinning believer is rebuked and (s)he turns from his/her sin and is forgiven, (s)he is won back to fellowship with the body and with its head, Jesus Christ. The goal of church discipline, then, is not to throw people out of the church or to feed the self-righteous pride of those who administer the discipline. It is not to embarrass people or to exercise authority and power in some unbiblical manner. **The purpose is to restore a sinning believer to holiness and bring him back into a pure relationship within the congregation.**

In Matthew 18:15, Jesus says, *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”* The Greek word translated “gained” was originally used of accumulating wealth in the sense of monetary commodities. Here it refers to the gaining back of something of value that is lost, namely, an erring brother or sister. When a brother or sister strays, a valuable treasure is lost, and the church should not be content until (s)he is restored. The body of Christ is in the business of recovery (Gal. 6:1), and such is the purpose of church discipline. It really cannot be said enough – **restoration and redemption are always the goal for any disciplinary effort** (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:5; Gal. 6:1-5).

In addition to restoring a sinning believer, church discipline can also help the church fulfill additional God-glorifying objectives:

- To keep sin from spreading to others (1 Tim. 5:20; 1 Cor. 5:6-8; Heb. 12:15). The influence of sin is destructive and extensive. Individuals do not sin in isolation. Like a cancer in the bones, the unrepentant sin of an individual will permeate through the entire body if it is not addressed and removed
- To help protect the church from false teachers and those who foster division (Acts 20:25-31; Titus 1:10-11).
- To maintain unity within the body. There will be no peace and unity where there is no humility, repentance, and pursuit of godliness. Therefore, discipline is exercised that the fruit of peace, righteousness, order, and unity may abound (Heb. 12:11, 14; Eph. 4:1-16; 1 Cor. 6:1-11; 1 Cor. 3:17; Eph. 5:25-27).

The Preaching of Church Discipline

On occasion a professing believer will become ensnared by sin, and when lovingly called to repent by the church, will repeatedly refuse to listen. Eventually, it will become necessary for the church to take formal punitive action against this church member by corporately rebuking the individual and excommunicating him/her until (s)he repents (Matt. 18:17; Titus 3:10-11; et al.). In addition to communicating the seriousness of unrepentant sin, expelling an individual from the church also functions as a proclamation of future divine judgment. The temporal punishment of excommunication is intended to warn the unrepentant by pointing to eternal realities to come: judgment and eternal separation from God. Jesus said:

*Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (22) On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” (23) And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; **depart from me**, you workers of lawlessness.” – Matt. 7:21-23*

These church pronouncements are not infallible, and the church will not always get its discipline right. Perfect divine judgment belongs to Jesus Christ alone. But when done in accordance with God’s Word, they do come with divine sanction. When teaching His disciples to practice church discipline, Jesus declared:

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (19) Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. (20) For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”
- Matt. 18:18-20

The church is instructed to exercise discipline in anticipation of the final verdict. Therefore, when we fail to lovingly but firmly follow through with discipline, we fail our role as the church to prepare professing believers for Jesus’ second coming and the realities of the righteous judgment He will perform upon arrival.

² John MacArthur, “Church Discipline.” Retrieved 2 August 2011 from http://www.gty.org/resources/Distinctives/DD02_Church-Discipline.

Elders and Church Discipline³

The elders have been appointed by God to shepherd His people by teaching them, leading them, and caring for them. God holds the elders of His church accountable for these responsibilities:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with his own blood. (29) I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; (30) and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. (31) Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. – Acts 20:28-31

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

– Heb. 13:17

Jesus, as our Shepherd (Jn. 10:1-14), calls us as elders to be His “under-shepherds,” to pursue those who are straying from the way of God, the truth of God, and the life of God (cf. Matt. 18:12-14; Jn. 14:6).

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? (13) And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. (14) So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. – Matt. 18:12-14

“True elders do not command the consciences of their brethren, but appeal to their brethren to faithfully follow God’s Word. Out of love, true elders suffer and bear the brunt of difficult people and problems so that the lambs are not bruised. They bear the misunderstanding and sins of others so the assembly may live in peace. They lose sleep so that others may rest. They make great personal sacrifices of time and energy for the welfare of others. They see themselves as men under authority. They depend on God for wisdom and help, not on their own power and cleverness. They face the false teacher’s fierce attacks. They guard the community’s liberty and freedom in Christ so that the saints are encouraged to develop their gifts, to mature, and to serve one another.”⁴

- Alexander Strauch

Though all members of the church bear the responsibility for mutual encouragement and rebuke in the gospel, the elders bear the God-given responsibility to “bind and loose” based on the authority of God and His word (cf. Matt. 18:18-20). Not only are the elders responsible to lead through the instances when formal disciplinary action must be taken, they also serve as the authority in matters of excommunication and readmitting repentant believers back into the fellowship.

The Church Discipline Process

We have defined church discipline as *the responsibility of the body of Christ to confront and correct a sinning believer in order to bring him/her back in line with God’s Word*. But the question remains to be answered is how is this actually done? In other words, what are the specific procedural steps that should be taken to accomplish this important work in a way that honors Christ and His Word?

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus sets forth the four step process of church discipline:

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (16) But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. (17) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

From this passage we can see the process of church discipline include the following steps: (1) Private Rebuke; (2) Plural Rebuke; (3) Public Rebuke; and (4) Treat the unrepentant as an unbeliever.

³ Sojourn, p. 7.

⁴ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1995, p. 98.

Who Initiates the Process?

Although the elders are responsible to lead the church through instances when formal disciplinary action must be taken (steps 3 and 4), it is the responsibility of the entire body of Christ to initiate the restorative process when a brother or sister is found in sin. In other words, when a Spirit-guided believer is aware of an offense with another, (s)he is responsible to pursue loving restoration and peace through the process found in Matthew 18:15-17.

Walk by Faith!

As believers, we walk by faith not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). This includes our involvement in the church discipline process. Faith is displayed through prayerful dependence upon the Lord to provide the wisdom, love, courage, gentleness and endurance required for such a task. Church discipline is totally dependent on the power of God working through the Spirit of God and the people of God as they minister the Word of God⁵:

*Rather, **speaking the truth in love**, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ (29) Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. – Eph. 4:15, 29*

*Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a **spirit of gentleness**. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. (2) Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. – Gal. 6:1-2*

*Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; **reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching**. (3) For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, (4) and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (5) As for you, always **be sober-minded**, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. – 2 Tim. 4:2-5*

Step 1: Private Rebuke (Informal)

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. – Matt. 18:15

The process of church discipline begins on an individual level. Jesus said, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” Here, an individual believer is to go to a sinning brother/sister privately and confront him in a spirit of humility and gentleness. This confrontation involves clearly exposing his sin so that (s)he is aware of it and calling the individual to repentance. If the sinning brother repents in response to the private confrontation, that brother is forgiven and restored (v. 15b). This kind of gentle confrontation by lovingly pointing out a brother or sister’s sin should be part of the normal, everyday gospel life of believers.

For What Sins Should Church Discipline Be Exercised?

It should be noted that Matthew 18 does not command believers to address every single sin they might witness or feel is committed against them. All believers are still imperfect and daily fall into some type of behavior or attitude that is sinful. In many cases, believers will already be aware of a sin and struggling to overcome it. In such an instance, a confrontation might do more harm than good. Also, when there are issues of conduct on which Christians legitimately disagree, Paul encourages a wide degree of tolerance (Rom. 14:1-23).

What church discipline seeks to address and correct is persistent unbelief and sin, as well as publically known sin that brings reproach upon the name of Christ. Wayne Grudem notes the following principle found in the New Testament:

All the sins that were explicitly disciplined in the New Testament were publically known or outwardly evident sins, and many of which had continued over a period of time. The fact that the sins were publically known meant that reproach was being brought on the church, Christ was being dishonored, and

⁵ Sojourn, pgs. 8-9.

there was a real possibility that others would be encouraged to follow the wrongful pattern of life that was being publically tolerated.⁶

Confidentiality

It is important to recognize that the first step of the restoration process involves privacy and confidentiality. No one should be privy to the initial confrontation except those who are directly involved. If the sinner brother/sister refuses to listen, only then is the issue brought to the attention of others. Even then there is a gradual progression that depends upon the response of the individual needing to repent and be restored. Grudem notes that as the church discipline process progresses from step to step, the abiding principle in terms of confidentiality is that the knowledge of the specific sin(s) should be kept to the smallest group possible:

This seems to be the purpose in Matthew 18:15-17 behind the gradual progression from a private meeting, to a meeting with two or three others, to telling the entire church. The fewer people who know about some sin, the better, because repentance is easier, fewer people are led astray, and less harm is done to the reputation of the person, the reputation of the church, and the reputation of Christ.⁷

Is It Right to Judge Others' Sin?

It is not uncommon to hear individuals outside the church, and unfortunately sometimes those inside as well, reference Jesus' words, "*Judge not, that you be not judged*" (Matt. 7:1), in an attempt to argue that all forms of judgment against others' sin is prohibited by God. As the original context of the Sermon on the Mount reveals, Jesus is not condemning all types of judgment. What He is condemning in Matt. 7:1 is the ugly, self-righteous, judgmental, critical spirit of the Pharisees. There is a righteous kind of judgment we are supposed to exercise with careful discernment (John 7:24). In fact, Jesus is explaining to His disciples this type of righteous judgment in Matthew 18:15-17 for the proper practice of church discipline.

Step 2: Plural Rebuke (Informal)

But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. – Matt. 18:16

If the sinning brother/sister refuses to listen to the one who has rebuked him/her privately, the next step in the discipline process is to take one or two more spiritually-minded believers along to confront the person again (v. 16a). The purpose of taking other mature believers is so *every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*" In other words, the witnesses are present not only to confirm that the sin was committed but, in addition, to confirm that the sinning brother/sister was properly rebuked and that (s)he has or has not repented.

Again, the purpose of this inclusion of other people is not primarily to intensify the reprove or display of loving concern (both of which are legitimate and may in fact occur). The primary purpose of the text seems to be that these people might serve as witnesses to the confrontational process itself. These witnesses are there to observe and confirm a) the charge itself to determine (if possible) whether or not a sin was truly committed, b) whether or not truth was spoken in love, c) whether the offending party listened and repented, and d) all involved did what was necessary to pursue peace and reconciliation.⁸

Step 3: Public Rebuke (Formal)

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. – Matt. 18:17a

If the sinning brother/sister refuses to listen and respond to the confrontation of the witnesses after a period of time, those witnesses are then to tell it to the church (v. 17a). This is most appropriately done by bringing the matter to the attention of the elders, who in turn oversee its communication to the assembly as a whole.

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, pgs. 896-97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 897.

⁸ Sojourn, p. 12.

How long should the witnesses continue to call the person to repentance before telling the church? The elders at TPCC will avoid carrying out the third or fourth stage of church discipline until they are absolutely certain that the erring believer has truly sinned, or is continuing to sin, and that (s)he has refused to repent when appropriately confronted.

Step 4: Treat the Unrepentant as an Unbeliever

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. – Matt. 18:17b

The fourth and final step in the process of church discipline is ostracism. If a sinning believer refuses to listen even to the church, (s)he is to be removed from the fellowship. Jesus said, “*let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*” The term “Gentile” was primarily used of non-Jews who held to their traditional paganism and had no part in the covenant, worship, or social life of the Jews. On the other hand, a “tax collector” was an outcast from the Jews by choice, having become a traitor to his own people. Jesus’ use of these terms doesn’t mean that the church is to treat these people badly. It simply means that when a professing believer refuses to repent, the church is to treat him/her as if (s)he were outside of the fellowship and not as a brother or sister in Christ.

As far as the welfare of the church is concerned, the purpose of putting the unrepentant person out is to protect the purity of the fellowship (1 Cor. 5:6), to warn the assembly of the seriousness of sin (1 Tim. 5:20), and to give a testimony of righteousness to a watching world. But as far as the welfare of the unrepentant brother/sister is concerned, the purpose of the ostracism is not to punish but to awaken. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul rebuked the church at Corinth for excusing the gross sexual immorality of an unrepentant man and failing to excommunicate him from the local assembly. Paul reprimanded them sternly:

*Let him who has done this be removed from among you. . . (5) **you are to deliver this man to Satan** for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. – 1 Cor. 5:2,5*

This is consistent with the actions Paul took against two false teachers as described in 1 Timothy:

*. . . among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom **I have handed over to Satan** that they may learn not to blaspheme. – 1 Tim 1:20*

Since the sphere outside the church is the realm of Satan (1 John 5:9; cf. Col. 1:13; Eph. 2:12), to deliver someone into this realm is to put this individual out of the church, cutting him/her off from all Christian privileges. This will include, but not limited to:⁹

- The one removed from membership can no longer be affirmed as a believer in Christ and is excommunicated from church membership (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:11-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-17; Eph. 5:11; Titus 3:10-11), which also implies the person will not be allowed to take part in any benefits of membership, such as members meetings and family celebrations.
- The one removed from membership may not be allowed to attend Sunday Worship Gatherings at The Point. Such exclusion depends on the nature of the offense, the potential for divisive influence within the community, the potential danger posed by the offender, or unless authorized by the elders for the purpose of public confession (2 Thess. 3:14; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-17; Titus 3:10).
- The one removed from membership should not be allowed to take communion (1 Cor. 11:27-32). The elders need to be informed if the person is seen taking communion after being removed from membership but before restoration. The elder or designated ministry leader will not make a scene during the worship service but will contact the person after the fact.
- The one removed from membership cannot attend any PCGs—unless authorized by the elders and for the purpose of public confession (2 Thess. 3:14; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-17; Titus 3:10). Such willful unrepentance confuses believers and unbelievers and can possibly divide the group. Be sure to remove the person from any church group e-mails.
- The one removed from membership is no longer under the care of the elders and the person is prayerfully handed over to his flesh, the world, and Satan (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:25-26) so the Lord might grant repentance.

⁹ Sojourn, p. 16.

*Action Steps for the Church*¹⁰

Practically, what does it look like to not associate with one who has been removed from membership and is to be treated as an outsider of the church?

What is permissible?

- The elders will ask TPCC members to pray for the person removed from membership and to ask the Lord continually to bring the person to repentance and back to Christ.
- The elders will inform TPCC members that they are permitted to associate with the unrepentant person only for the purpose of admonishment and restoration (2 Thess. 3:15; Gal. 6:1-2). They will also be instructed to call the offender back to Christ by faith and repentance with gospel intentionality, humility, and grace that both comforts and challenges with the goal of redemption.

What is not permissible?

- Members of the church should not associate with or eat with (2 Thess. 3:14; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-17; Titus 3:10) the unrepentant person. This also includes refraining from contacting the individual(s) through email, Facebook or other social networking avenues.
- The elders will inform TPCC members that they are not permitted to associate with the person removed from membership and to pretend everything is okay or normal in the midst of the person's rebellious and unrepentant posture towards God and the church. The unrepentant person needs to understand that the church is unified in God's discipline process, as led by the church elders.
- Additional wisdom and discernment is needed for those church members who have relational ties (family, co-worker, neighbor) with the one removed from membership. In extreme cases involving physical or emotional abuse, or illegal activities, family members should maintain separation with the unrepentant offender (cf. 1 Cor. 7:10-11). Moreover, co-workers and neighbors should not gather socially with the unrepentant person for a meal.

Such separation serves as a God-ordained means to help those hardened by sin to confess and repent. If he is truly a Christian, God will not cast him away, but He may allow him to sink still deeper before he becomes desperate enough to turn from his sin. The command not to have fellowship or even social contact with the unrepentant brother does not exclude all contact. When there is an opportunity to admonish him and try to call him back, the opportunity should be taken. In fact, such opportunities should be sought. But the contact should be for the purpose of admonishment and restoration and no other.

Membership Meetings

The elders will utilize a regular or special called members' meeting to inform the church of discipline cases that have reached step 4 and require removal from membership. Below are the general guidelines for such a meeting:

- **Teach** on the purpose and process of church discipline. Such teaching will serve as a reminder for some and as additional teaching on body life of the church for others.
- **Identify** the situation or person, depending on the nature and publicity of the offense, so that the members may act in appropriate response according to scripture. Do not share all of the details but describe the nature of the sin struggle and how the offense violates Scripture—say as little as necessary but enough to enable the church to do the work of ministry.
- **Inform** the members of the implications of being removed from membership, stating the action steps taken against the unrepentant person.
- **Instruct** the members of their responsibilities—how they can love the unrepentant person by praying for the person and situation, avoiding fellowship in a redemptive manner, and ministering Christ and his word. Members should also be encouraged to love on the person's family, as they have been significantly impacted and are in great need for love through intentional care, support, and relevant practical assistance.

¹⁰ Sojourn, 16-17.

- **Warn** the members against gossip, stressing the church discipline process is a “family matter” and should not be discussed with anyone outside of TPCC membership. Also call every member to examine their own relationship with God in gospel humility, to include their own struggles to live out the gospel.
- **Share** that if the Lord grants genuine repentance (cf. Rom. 2:4; 2 Tim. 2:24-26) and such repentance is evident by word and action over a period of time, then the individual can be restored to fellowship, with much discernment and caution, through the normal means to membership.
- **Pray** the Lord might grant repentance and restoration to himself and to the church. Ask the members to break up in groups of 3-5 to go before the Lord and cry out for mercy for those who have been removed from membership, for their family members, and for themselves.

Repentance and Restoration

What happens if an individual professes repentance after (s)he has been removed from TPCC membership? God provides direct and specific instructions on how we are to restore one who, by God’s grace, has experienced godly sorrow that “produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret” (2 Cor. 7:10).

*Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure--not to put it too severely--to all of you. (6) For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, (7) **so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him**, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. (8) So I beg you **to reaffirm your love for him**. (9) For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. (10) Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, (11) so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs. – 2 Cor. 2:5-11*

The passage makes clear those in the church are called to forgive, comfort, and reaffirm their love for the one who was disciplined by the church and later repents by the grace of God. Such redemptive and restorative actions reflect the gospel and how Christ forgives, comforts, and loves us.

Intentional gospel community is essential to restore one hardened by sin but broken by grace. When sincere repentance is evidenced through changed affections and submission towards God, along with changed actions and attitudes towards others (cf. 2 Cor. 7:10-11; Jas. 4:7-10; Joel 2:12-13), TPCC will follow the following general list of steps in order to help restore the repentant person with God and others.¹¹

1. Require the one being restored to go before those in his/her immediate community for confession of sin and to request forgiveness— the elders will help determine who is included in this relevant community.
2. Gather and coordinate individuals, and/or couples to offer redemptive community focused primarily on the person’s relationship with God and secondarily on how the gospel calls the person to relate to others—friends, spouse, children, extended family, and others as appropriate.
3. Outline the restoration process with as much detail as necessary. Restoration may take weeks or months depending on the severity and duration of the struggle.
4. Provide clear guidance to the one being restored and the one(s) impacted by the sinful behavior all throughout the process of restoration, making sure the redemptive community knows of major details and steps along the way.
5. Ensure the church leadership and redemptive community is somehow included in the restoration process should the one being restored choose to work with an outside counselor. One means of linking care received from outside the church with those in the church is for the one(s) involved in outside counseling to give written consent for a church leader to be periodically updated by the counselor.
6. Communicate clearly to those involved when the restoration process is complete, as determined by the church leader overseeing the process. Recognize a transition needs to take place in the minds of everyone, especially the one being restored once the formal discipline process is complete—help identify “next steps” for this transition period.
7. Require the one being restored to attend the membership classes again, go through a membership interview with an elder, and complete TPCC Membership Form and Covenant.
8. Arrange to announce the person’s restoration to fellowship in a community group or members’ meeting, based on the extent of the church discipline, so that all can rejoice and celebrate God’s mercy (Luke 15:3-7—parable of the lost sheep; 15:11-32—parable of the lost son).

¹¹ Sojourn, pgs. 19-20.

- The person should be given the opportunity for a brief public confession.
- The announcement should make clear the person is once again in right standing with the Lord and his church. The church should be exhorted to forgive the person, to reconcile with the person, not allowing anything that may hinder the person's fellowship with the church—anything less may hinder the person's continued growth in grace and may allow the enemy the opportunity to wreak havoc with the person and church body once again (2 Cor. 2:10-11).

Appendix 1

For What Sins Should the Church Exercise Discipline?

The following, although not an exhaustive list, gives some biblical examples of sin that would warrant the engagement of the church discipline process:¹²

- When a believer sins against another Christian and it cannot be overlooked in love (Matt. 18:15-22; Prov. 19:11)
- When a Christian who professes faith lives in sin without repentance (1 Cor. 5:1-13)
- When a Christian continually blasphemes God (1 Tim. 1:18-20)
- When a Christian sins and is unrepentant (Gal. 6:1-5; 2 Cor. 2:5-11, Matt. 18:15-20)
- When someone encourages or promotes false doctrine (Acts 20:25-31; 1 Tim. 1:4-7, 4:1-8; Gal. 1:6-9)
- When a Christian is a habitual doctrinal debater (2 Tim. 1:14-26)
- When a Christian will only heed false teachers (2 Tim. 4:1-5)
- When a Christian is sincere but deceived (2 Cor. 11:3-4, 13-15)
- When a teacher is in moral sin or doctrinal error (Jam. 3:1)
- When an elder is in moral sin or doctrinal error (1 Tim. 5:19-21)
- When a Christian appoints themselves to leadership (3 John 1:9-10)
- When a Christian is divisive (Titus 3:10-11)
- When a Christian is lazy or an idle busybody (2 Thess. 3:6, 11)
- When a Christian promotes legalism (Gal. 5:7-15, Phil. 3:2-3)
- When a Christian refuses to obey civil laws (Rom. 13:1-7)
- When a Christian engages in ongoing sexual immorality (incest, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, rape, lust, pornography, etc) (1 Cor. 5)
- When a Christian has repeatedly rejected counsel of the church elders and refuses to submit to their authority (Heb. 13:17; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; 1 Thess. 5:12-13)
- When a Christian is not consistently in community or is habitually absent from public worship without good reason (Heb. 10:24-25; Col. 3:16)
- When a Christian leaves the church to pursue sin/heresy (1 John 2:19)

¹²This list was partially adapted from Mars Hill Elder Document on Church Discipline, p. 10.

Appendix 2

General Steps for a Gospel Confrontation¹³

Our goal is to do more than read people a list of charges from Scripture or tell them what we think of them. We want to help people understand what is wrong and lead them back to Christ for their only source of hope. Here are some key steps in the restoration process:

- Consideration — What does God want the person to see (about self, God, others, life, truth, change)? Ask questions; engage them in discussion. What does God want me to see?
- Confession — What does God want the person to admit and confess? What things do I need to confess?
- Commitment — To what new ways of living is God calling this person made possible by the gospel? What new ways of living is God calling me to live by faith through the gospel?
- Change — How should these new commitments be applied to daily living by the grace of God for me and the other person?
- Choose — What words should be used so that the confrontation will be gentle and loving to minimize defensiveness and not cause undue hurt.
- Carve — How much time will be sufficient for an unrushed, face-to-face conversation, making sure you talk soon after arranging the meeting? Long delays cause undue tension and anxiety. Avoid communicating via phone or e-mail—eye contact and non-verbal communication are essential to gospel confrontation. Make sure you allow enough time so both of you can share and ask necessary clarifying and exploratory questions.

¹³ Taken from Sojourn Community Church's *Church Discipline Guidelines* (June 2009), pg. 11

Appendix 3

Recognizing True Repentance

While we are called to forgive the sinner, we are also still commanded to hold them accountable to their sin. We have just seen how we are to treat them if they remain in unrepentant sin. Now we want to turn our attention to how we discern if they are truly repentant.

There is a false repentance and worldly sorrow that does not lead to salvation and should not be grounds for the termination of church discipline. False repentance will be marked by selfishness and defensiveness. Worldly sorrow is marked by a sorrow for being caught in the sin, or sorrow for the consequences that sin incurred, but not sorrow for sinning against God and others (Psalm 53, II Cor. 7, etc). Treating worldly sorrow and false repentance like it's enough will not prove beneficial for the offender or those who have been sinned against. Therefore, discernment must be employed and seasons of testing must occur.

When discerning whether or not repentance is genuine, we must always look for Godly sorrow:

*For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it--though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. (9) As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. (10) For **godly grief produces a repentance** that leads to salvation without regret, whereas **worldly grief produces death.** – 2 Cor. 7:8-10*

Identifying True Repentance¹⁴

- 1) *Conviction of sin...*this is the work of the Holy Spirit. Every person has a God-given conscience...so when you've felt-bad, been embarrassed or ashamed for what you've done, that's conviction. This is GOOD, but don't stay there. Don't blame others, don't find a genetic argument, don't excuse yourself, and don't minimize your sin. True Holy Spirit conviction of sin takes ownership and responsibility for it.
- 2) *Confession of sin...* I John 1:9... "*if we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" Since our sin is against God, then we confess first to God...humbly, respectfully, and honestly. We agree with God and tell the truth about who we are and what we've done. Confession includes naming our sin (and being particular, not generic) to God and the ones we've hurt. We don't minimize it, we honestly acknowledge it. Conviction of sin is God's gift to us; confession of sin is our response to Him, which prepares us and enables repentance, restitution, and reconciliation.
- 3) *Repentance of sin...*This includes deep, heart-felt remorse that leads to a change of mind that leads to a change of life that leads to putting to death sin that leads to establishing a track-record of faithfulness over an extended period of time.
- 4) *Restitution of sin...*When we sin, we are stealing from and hurting other people. This may include actual property, or things like trust, love, and intimacy. The Bible is clear that our redemption is a gift of grace from Jesus alone to be received by us through personal faith in Him (Eph. 2:8-9). The result of this gift of salvation is a humility and ongoing life of good works (Eph. 2:10), not so that Jesus will redeem us, but because he already has. These good works will include us seeking to make restitution for all that we have done to damage others. If you've ripped people off, you pay them back. If you've lied about people, you correct it and tell people that you lied. You do whatever you can and go to whatever lengths possible to make things right. And that takes TIME.
- 5) *Reconciliation of sin...*It's not *wound someone + sorry = fine*. It's *wound someone + ongoing repentance demonstrated over time that rebuilds trust that = reconciliation*. You lose trust quickly, and you gain it slowly. Repentance means you're willing to patiently earn that trust back. For a minor sin, this can happen relatively quickly. For a more significant, sin such as adultery, the betrayal and hurt runs deep and will take much longer to build trust back. So we're forgiving, but we verify.

The elders, at their discretion, can help put together and oversee a reconciliation strategy and plan to help the offender establish a new track record of faithfulness. The plan can include steps to take that would be reasonable to expect someone to do who is claiming repentance. This plan can be a wonderful means of identifying whether or not the

¹⁴ Adapted largely from *Mars Hill Church Discipline Handbook*, Scott Thomas, p. 4.

repentance is true, and a wonderful opportunity for the offender to demonstrate his/her willingness to submit to leadership and display genuine repentance.

Identifying Counter Repentance

There are many counterfeit versions of repentance. Some people want the benefits of repentance without the hard heart-work of actually repenting.

- 1) True repentance is not just words and mere confession. "I did it, I'm sorry, my bad" is not repentance. If they say over and over again "oh yeah, I'm sorry..." and yet they continue sinning, then there's been no deep, true, genuine repentance. This can be extremely confusing and hurtful to the one who has been sinned against, and often the offender will make the hurt person feel guilty for not taking him/her back. They're using their "repentance" as a means of control and manipulation.
- 2) True repentance is not selfish. There are people who pretend to repent in an effort to get a benefit. In other words, when they sinned, it was driven by selfish motives, and when they repented, it was driven by selfish motives. They aren't broken over their sin...they just did the math and realized it would work out better to come back and "repent." They are still being driven by the sin of selfishness. Real repentance isn't worried about the reward of repentance. True repentance seeks the restoration of the relationship that was broken.
- 3) True repentance is not religious repentance. Religious people repent of everyone else's sins, but never their own. Sitting atop their white throne, they issue judgment on everyone but themselves. True repentance sees one's own sin and sinfulness, not others. The position of the person who is truly repentant is "I am the worst sinner I know."
- 4) True repentance doesn't make excuses. If a person starts defending and excusing their sin, they have yet to reach true repentance. True repentance stops needing to defend and stands before God completely open and honest. "Against you and you alone have I sinned, and there is no excuse, Oh Lord," is the position of the truly repentant.
- 5) True repentance is not worldly sorrow. In other words, the regret and remorse they feel is because they got caught in their sin, not because of the sin itself. Their regret comes from the consequence of the sin, not over a feeling of remorse for having sinned against God and hurt other people.